

# Lessons of the teachers unions' betrayals in Los Angeles and Oakland

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Despite mass opposition to school reopenings among educators, parents and students, United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) and Oakland Education Association (OEA) were able to ram through deadly deals to reopen schools in Los Angeles and Oakland on Sunday. This marks a major turning point in the homicidal drive to reopen schools throughout California and across the US, which is one of the Biden administration's key domestic policies.

In Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second largest school district in the US with over 600,000 students, all teachers are required to be in classrooms by April 12 unless they have a verified medical reason to stay remote. In-person classes will also begin for K-6 students April 12, with secondary students returning in late April. In Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), the 96th largest school district in the US with roughly 50,000 students, all teachers are to report back to their classrooms by April 14, with K-6 students and high-needs students in grades 7-12 being brought back April 19.

The reopening deals were only approved due to the immense pressure and intimidation brought to bear by the UTLA and OEA on their membership. Both unions have conspired with their local school boards, Democratic Party officials in the state, the Biden administration and the leadership of the state and national teachers unions to orchestrate these abject betrayals, which will lead to infections and deaths in schools and their surrounding communities.

The reopening of schools takes place under extremely dangerous conditions. California's politicians have eased restrictions, reopening restaurants, businesses and schools, despite the spread of more infectious and lethal variants. At the national level, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has manipulated science to serve the Biden administration's agenda, lowering their spacing recommendation between students from six feet to three feet in order to pack as many children into schools as possible. On Saturday, California Department of Public Health released their own guidelines to allow three-foot distancing in classrooms.

In response to the unions' betrayals, there has been radio silence from the various pseudo-left outlets and organizations, including *Jacobin*, *Labor Notes*, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), Socialist Alternative, By Any Means Necessary (BAMN) and others active in both Los Angeles and Oakland.

It is critical that educators draw lessons from this experience to prepare for future struggles, in particular the need to expand the network of Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees that now exist in California and internationally, as an independent voice of opposition to the unions and big-business parties. Throughout the drive to reopen schools, these committees in Los Angeles, Northern California and across the West Coast have been the only organizations actively fighting to warn educators and oppose these deadly plans throughout the region.

## How the betrayals in LA and Oakland unfolded after Chicago

In early February, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) forced through a similar deal to reopen the third largest school district in the US. The union lied to teachers, claiming that no concessions would be made to the detriment of public safety, and then reneged on all its pledges and reached a completely unsafe deal with the district that they pressured members to approve.

This was a critical turning point in the nationwide push to reopen schools in major Democrat-led cities and it coincided with a massive propaganda campaign by the corporate media to smear educators and pressure parents into believing schools were safe.

The CTU, UTLA and OEA are all run by pseudo-left "radical" caucuses within the union apparatus. This includes the United Caucuses of Rank-and-File Educators (UCORE), which took control of the CTU leadership in 2010, now led by Jesse Sharkey, ex-leader of the International Socialist Organization (ISO). The UTLA and OEA have followed in their footsteps in an attempt to give their unions a democratic and militant veneer.

OEA president Keith Brown, UTLA president Cecily Myart-Cruz and vice president Alex Caputo-Pearl all helped orchestrate the current betrayals, repeating on a far graver scale their stifling of the 2019 teacher strikes in LA and Oakland. While their betrayals in 2019 led to budget cuts, school closures and teachers' layoffs, the betrayals today will lead to infections and deaths from COVID-19 throughout both cities.

Over the past five weeks, the UTLA and OEA followed the same playbook of the CTU to reopen schools in their districts. To illustrate the collusion of the unions with the Biden administration and Democrats to force open schools, it is important to review events leading up to the approval of the deal between the UTLA and LAUSD, which was more openly on display in the media than parallel developments in Oakland.

**Feb 2-5:** UTLA Twitter account hails support of the CTU as supposedly leading the opposition of teachers to in-person learning.

**February 11:** After the CTU betrayed teachers and imposed their deal to reopen schools, both the UTLA and OEA have remained silent on the conditions of educators and students in Chicago, under conditions in which K-12 schools have become the number one source of COVID-19 transmission throughout Illinois.

**March 1:** An estimated 75,000 vaccine doses are made available for California teachers, as part of a nationwide push to vaccinate teachers in order to reopen schools.

Newsom informs both LAUSD and UTLA officials in a closed meeting the guidelines for reopening under Senate Bill 86. One of the LAUSD officials—who wished to remain anonymous to avoid retaliation—revealed to the WSWs that as Newsom briefed participants, the "UTLA reps remained absolutely quiet and raised no objection whatsoever."

That evening, UTLA president Cecily Myart-Cruz launched a sham propaganda poll of "resistance" to support a "yes" vote for the tentative

agreement, provided that three prerequisites are met: community transmission falls into the still deadly red tier; vaccines are made available for all teachers; and teachers have access to PPE.

**March 2-5** UTLA holds chapter meetings among its membership throughout LAUSD to promote a “yes” vote in favor of the three prerequisites for a “safe return.” The unofficial vote was made to promote the illusion that teachers agreed with the paltry safety measures and prepared the stage for reopening in the red tier, which the UTLA and Newsom knew would shortly happen.

**March 4:** “Voluntary” return to work begins for teachers to provide in-person services and assessments for students. This effort to divide LA educators was endorsed by the UTLA.

**March 5:** Newsom signs SB 86 into law. The bill accelerates school reopenings regardless of the level of community transmission of COVID-19 in California’s 58 counties and offers districts access to a \$2 billion pool as an incentive to reopen by April 1. UTLA announces that its membership voted to approve their three prerequisites for a “safe return.”

**March 9:** Los Angeles County officially reaches “red tier” status. LAUSD superintendent Austin Beutner and Myart-Cruz release a joint celebratory statement announcing a tentative agreement was reached to reopen schools.

**March 14:** California updates its metrics to denote that once the state administers a total of two million vaccine doses to areas hardest hit by COVID-19, the case rates for the “red tier” could be broadened from 7 up to 10 cases per 100,000. The new metrics would help to keep counties out of the state’s most restrictive purple tier in order to facilitate the opening of schools and businesses.

**March 17-21:** Official vote on TA begins. On **March 18**, Myart-Cruz told UTLA membership during a UTLA Facebook Live video that if teachers vote “No,” the district “would be allowed the directive to unilaterally reopen physical school sites without our enforceable safety conditions in place.”

**March 21:** Beutner announces that schools will reopen April 12, which comes as a huge surprise to LAUSD teachers under the impression that schools would reopen April 19. A few hours later, the UTLA announces the approval of the TA and results of the vote.

The vote results show a high level of opposition to the TA and lack of confidence in the UTLA. Though the UTLA claims that 89 percent of the membership voted in favor of the TA, roughly 12,000 members abstained from voting altogether and 2,286 members voted against the deal, meaning that only slightly more than half of LAUSD teachers and other staff voted to approve the plan.

### Unions censor opposition to their deadly deals

Immediately after both TAs were announced in LA and Oakland, opposition exploded on social media. This prompted concerted efforts by the unions and their allies to censor critical voices by parents and educators opposed to these deadly plans, above all those sharing material from the WSWs.

The UTLA-backed Facebook group “Parents Supporting Teachers,” which has well over 22,000 members, has banned a retired LAUSD teacher for attempting to post in opposition to the union’s reopening plan. A current LAUSD kindergarten teacher has been banned from the UTLA public Facebook page for posting comments criticizing the union. Other posts in opposition to school reopenings have been deleted from UTLA’s Facebook video announcements.

The same policies were carried out in 2019 during the LA and Oakland teacher strikes. WSWs supporters who were banned in 2019 when

fighting against the union betrayals of those strikes are still not able to post on the union pages.

Just as the CTU did with its membership in Chicago, a propaganda campaign was carried out by both the UTLA and the OEA to ensure reopening. The unions have done everything they can to isolate teachers, attempt to instill defeat and insist that there is no way to prevent going back in.

### Expand the network of rank-and-file committees and the fight for socialism

Everywhere schools have reopened, there has been mass absenteeism, and every indication points to the majority of parents not sending their kids back as schools reopen in the coming weeks. Survey results released Monday by the *Los Angeles Times* found only 28 percent of LA families said they will send their elementary school students back, with 17 percent of middle school families and 10 percent of high school families.

Educators, parents and students everywhere must draw from this experience and break free from the stranglehold of the unions. Hostile to the genuine interests and unification of all workers, the unions are in no way fighting organizations. Rather, they are tied politically and financially to the Democratic Party, which is now spearheading the reopening of schools in order to reopen the economy, no matter the cost of workers’ lives and the health of their families. In reality, the unions are the organizations used to police the class struggle and stifle genuine opposition.

While the UTLA and OEA were negotiating behind closed doors with Newsom and state education officials such as Tony Thurmond and others, the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees have been organizing independently of both parties and the unions and have fought to connect educators and workers across district and state lines to oppose reopenings.

These committees continue to hold weekly meetings with educators from California, Oregon, Washington and throughout the US, during which educators and workers present and discuss the political situation, lay out the genuine science behind the dangers of reopening, and organize opposition and a fighting way forward. We urge all educators in Los Angeles, Oakland and throughout the West Coast to join the rank-and-file committees that exist in these areas.

Fundamentally, the crisis of the pandemic has exposed the systemic crisis of the capitalist system, which cannot be reformed. Workers must fight to unify every section of the working class internationally and take up the fight for socialism.



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